

Reviews

Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted: An American Poetics
by Rob Wilson

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In 1967, Rob Wilson left his hometown of Waterbury, Connecticut for California, crossing the country with a copy of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and a tattered newspaper photograph of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Forty years later, Wilson remains on that journey, taking James and Emerson as touchstones of his new book, *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted*. Like Emerson, Wilson understands the desire to explore and redefine the self, moving towards "self-empowerment and re-birth" (5), as the most fundamental of American urges. But for Wilson this impulse has always been, and continues to be, essentially a religious one. The American drive towards self-creation, Wilson argues, is best understood through the Christian trope of "conversion"—the "turning" away from one's previous self and towards a new spiritual birth. The conversion experience, Wilson argues, continues to be our American "experiential, subject-forming norm," from "born-again" Christianity to twelve-step programs, from "yoga quests" to celebrity dalliances with Kabbalah.

Wilson is well aware that many of his secular intellectual and academic readers will question his insistence on figuring American selfhood through this Christian trope. "Why would anyone in these secular times of Biblical abandon and marketized reason," he asks rhetorically, "want to invoke 'conversion'?" (13). He acknowledges the risk that such invocations of Christianity might seem to echo the rhetoric of "the fundamentalist U.S. right" and the "global drive to Empire" (12). For Wilson, however, conversion is less a conservative than a subversive or revolutionary force. Wilson's emphasis is not on the fixed endpoint of conversion, but on conversion as an ongoing and unstable process, a "pluralized commitment to modes, mores, and vocations to beatitude" that "can open up a language of possibility, metamorphosis, transregional migration, [and] cultural unset-

ting” which is “unstable, open-ended, and world-shattering” (3). Perhaps Wilson’s most provocative claim is that conversion, often viewed as part of a colonial project of evangelization and conquest, is in fact a force of “anti-imperial newness,” a “U.S. Empire-subverting power of “metamorphosis” that is “unsettling, countervailing, or dangerous to state convictions and conformist pieties” (9-10). Wilson thus brings New England discourses of spiritual rebirth and self-discovery to bear on a critique of the American imperial presence in the Pacific—a link to Wilson’s own long engagement with that region.

For all of Wilson’s sweeping ambitions, the figures he chooses to focus on in this study are an idiosyncratic lot, bookended by Henry Opukaha’ia (one of the first Hawaiian converts to Christianity) and Bob Dylan. Wilson devotes his first two chapters to Opukaha’ia (also known as Henry Obookiah), who left Hawaii as a youth in 1808 and traveled to Connecticut, where he became a Christian convert and received a religious education. Opukaha’ia hoped to return to Hawaii as a missionary, but died of typhoid fever in 1818. The posthumously published *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*, chronicling Opukaha’ia’s life and conversion, helped inspire a wave of white American missionaries to begin the large-scale conversion of Hawaiians to Christianity.

Given the subsequent US colonization of Hawaii, Wilson acknowledges, it is difficult not to associate the wave of conversions sparked by Opukaha’ia’s example with a “lethal enthusiasm to convert the pre-Americanized native” on the part of American missionaries, as “Conversion to Christianity went hand and glove . . . with conversion to American laws, contracts, rules of order, and forms of civilian modernity” (35). Wilson’s rather unexpected move, however, is to suggest this association of conversion with colonization represents a “prefabricated and rigid” (35) mode of reading Opukaha’ia’s legacy. Instead, Wilson proposes an “against-the-grain” interpretation “affirming native conversion as a feat of semiotic agency and outer-national becoming” (36-7). Wilson reads Opukaha’ia’s conversion to Christianity not as a submission to colonial power, but as an act of “self-fashioning” and “self-formation,” a “transformation of self-and-world via the mimesis of alterity” (71). Opukaha’ia “is not a dupe nor a de-nativized subject,” Wilson declares, “but an agent, voice, and maker of literature and history” (73).

Who, we may ask, is Wilson’s imagined antagonist in this debate? The insistence on Opukaha’ia’s agency might seem to point toward a de-

colonizing or postcolonial view of the native Hawaiian. It's surprising to find, then, that Wilson seems to be challenging the advocates of Hawaiian decolonization and sovereignty themselves, as represented by the well-known poet-activist Haunani-Kay Trask. In one striking passage, Wilson positions his reading of Opukaha'ia explicitly against Trask's rhetoric of sovereignty:

Haunani Kay Trask's outcry of decolonization, "I am not an American, we are not Christians" on stage at the large-scale January 1993 annexation protest at Iolani Palace, although important as political rhetoric, cannot gainsay the still small voice, global impact, and complexly outer-national story of Henry 'Ōpūkaha'ia/Obookiah, which goes on speaking its alternative modes, aims, and claims (in English/Hawaiian) upon Hawaii'i from beyond the grave. (84)

For Wilson, Trask's disavowal of Christianity appears to be trumped by the continuing force of Opukaha'ia's conversion. At first glance, Wilson may simply seem to be affirming a truism of postcolonial theory: decolonization often manifests itself as the mirror image of colonization, the negation of everything marked as "colonial." Wilson calls this process "counter-conversion," which in the Pacific context can become a "renativization and re-goding of beliefs, language, and modes of belonging" (34).

In Wilson's reading of Opukaha'ia, however, there is little evidence of a balance between conversion and counter-conversion, or of the hybridity that may be produced by the colonial-native encounter. Wilson's celebration of conversion as "semiotic becoming" (87) suggests that it is Christianity alone that can place subjects within language, a move which risks relegating the pre-Christian to the realm of the non-linguistic and primitive. "Conversion," Wilson asserts, "represents a turning of any selfhood into emplotted sign and whole narrative" (8)—an entry into signification that it would seem pre-Christian and non-Christian frameworks cannot provide. In an aside on traditional Hawaiian mythology, Wilson remarks that "premissionary" Hawaiian religion appears to be "lacking in . . . figures of transcendence that can mediate mimetic rivalry" and hence is characterized by "jealous rivalry" and "failed transcendence" (112)—in contrast to the Christian model of Paul, whose "subject-inaugurating conversion from Jew to Christ-drenched militant" initiates a "mimetic contagion" that allows later converts to transcend their origins (12). Wil-

son embraces conversion as literary trope and indeterminate process, but returns again and again to its Christian origins and framework. Trask's rejection of Christianity simply lacks, in Wilson's account, the freedom and energy associated with Opukaha'ia's embrace of it.

Wilson offers as his other exemplary Christian convert another surprising choice: Bob Dylan. Dylan's sporadic embrace of born-again Christianity, inaugurated publicly by his 1979 album *Slow Train Coming*, has often been regarded as merely a temporary phase in his career, and has been viewed with bewilderment or even hostility by some of his fans. While numerous critics have analyzed the Biblical and religious allusions that have characterized Dylan's lyrics throughout his career, Wilson argues that the trope of being "born again" is not incidental but central to Dylan's work. Dylan turns out to be a more fruitful subject than Opukaha'ia for Wilson's notion of conversion, as Dylan's shape-shifting, "trickster" image allows Wilson to emphasize conversion as an ongoing, never-completed process.

Wilson sees the former Robert Allen Zimmerman's adoption of the name "Bob Dylan" as a "conversion mask" that "converted 'Bob Dylan' to believing in his own power as a poet and mythmaker able to speak for or against American culture," quoting Dylan's own remark that the name "was given to me—by God" (171). "Dylan" was only the first of many personae that represented Dylan's "will to activate metamorphosis as a life principle," and since conversion serves Wilson as the central trope of American self-making, it was only through conversion that Dylan could realize his role as "didactic poet of American prophecy and denunciation" (173). The trouble with assuming this role as American Jeremiah, as Wilson acknowledges, is that the prophetic role of Christianity in the US has been reduced by conservative forces to a form of "submission to fundamentals of family, shopping mall, state security, sexual identity, and corporatized nation" (166). In reclaiming "born-again" Christianity from fundamentalist conservatives, Wilson argues, Dylan "aimed his poetry at cleansing the good of the accretions that had come to encumber visions of redemption or democratic possibility in his declining and Mammon-worshipping homeland" (172).

Dylan turns conversion into a subversive, critical force when he "sides with trope over truth" (178), destabilizing ideological fixity through a constant reinvention of the self—thereby heeding the seventeenth-century Puritan minister Thomas Shepard's call to "be always converting." Dylan's ongoing "conversion," far from shoring up a conservative

Christian ideology, acts as an anti-imperial force: the “anonymous, mobile, unfixed” prophet Dylan undermines “the determinations and false gods of Empire” (190). For Wilson, it is absolutely crucial that Dylan’s trickster persona not be seen merely as a form of deconstructive play or postmodern irony. That way lies the “post-deconstructive wariness” and “perspectival struggles between worldliness and unbelief in anything immaterial” in which critical theory currently finds itself “trapped” (12). Instead, Dylan’s reclaiming of what Greil Marcus calls “the old, weird America” is for Wilson an inescapably Christian act, in which Dylan “does adhere (over the course of his poetic career) to antimodern modes of ‘Evangelism’ even if masked, ironized, diasavowed, and troped.” This remains the case, Wilson asserts, “however myth-undermining and trickster-like Dylan gets as a poet” (189). Thus Wilson sees Dylan’s conversions, while opposing religious fixities, as also providing a rebuff to the secular pieties of his countercultural, liberal audience—much as Wilson’s book provides its own riposte to the secular ideologies of the contemporary US academy.

The limits of Wilson’s approach become more evident in the book’s middle chapters, which treat Tongan writer Epeli Hau’ofa and American poet Ai. Hau’ofa, a scholar and novelist who imagines the Pacific islands unified into an “Oceania” that turns away from its history of European and US colonization and dependency, forms a mirror image of the Christian convert Opuhaka’ia, while Ai, known for her persona poems and her intense depictions of violence, appears as a sort of inverted Dylan. Wilson reads Hau’ofa’s well-known 1993 talk “Our Sea of Islands” as an epiphanic moment of “counter-conversion,” in which Hau’ofa echoes Biblical language even as he turns away from colonialism and Christianity toward a “re-worlded and re-goded” vision of the Pacific unified “under the aegis of [Hawaiian goddess] Pele” (121–23). But as in the juxtaposition of Opuhaka’ia and Trask, counter-conversion seems to be an inverted and attenuated version of the original Christian conversion, and Wilson’s analysis of Hau’ofa largely limits itself to tracing allusions to and parodies of Christianity in Hau’ofa’s fiction.

Wilson’s discussion of Ai, a mixed-race poet of black, Asian, Native American, and European descent, is perhaps the least satisfying part of the book. Wilson reads Ai’s use of personae, like Dylan’s, as evidence of an Emersonian drive toward self-transcendence. But since Ai, unlike Dylan, does not embrace or extensively reference Christianity in her work, Wilson is forced to fall back on the alternative hypothesis that “As a person

of mixed-race origin, Ai might well explore and expose, through poetic symbols, the violence wrought against her ancestors by the murderously abstract Christians” (162). While Dylan’s embrace of conversion seems to grant him the freedom to transcend his origins, Ai’s counter-conversion seems all too historically circumscribed, with her violent play of personae understood as a “historical sign” of trauma.

In a book devoted to self-transformation, it should come as no surprise that Wilson closes by reflecting on his own “conversion.” Turning against the grain once more, Wilson provides us not with a narrative of traditional religious conversion but of his “conversion through literature.” Having sought transcendence in music and drugs, the young Rob Wilson finally found it by reading Emerson in an undergraduate course at the University of California, Berkeley in 1968, as he was “taken out of myself into something I can only call the linguistic Over-soul of literature” (223). Emerson’s vision of “self-reliant conversion” was a view of conversion “not so read as salvation but as experimentation, trope, and mask” (224). This call to the vocation of reading, studying, and teaching literature will resonate deeply with many of Wilson’s readers, as will his late-1960s identification of this vocation with “immigrants, beat-pilgrim souls, and libertarian forces of creative enunciation” (225). But fewer may be able to follow Wilson into his (to borrow one of his own favored images) belief-drenched terrain, in which literature is not an end in itself but one of the varieties of American religious experience.